

# AFTER SALZBURG: ON REJECTION OF POST-BREXIT BLUEPRINT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: European Union (EU)

The rejection of Prime Minister [Theresa May's post-Brexit blueprint](#) at the Salzburg summit rules out nothing as yet in Britain's rocky negotiations on withdrawing from the European Union. All the same, the development is a blow to Ms. May, who faces a possible backlash at the Conservative party conference this month. Her proposal, adopted by the Cabinet in July, has deepened divisions among the Tories. Two senior Eurosceptic ministers have quit. A controversial idea in the July white paper is for a hybrid arrangement, with Britain staying in the common market only for trade in goods and agriculture, and without the obligations of free movement of people. This is at odds with the EU stance of not allowing cherry-picking when it comes to its four basic freedoms — of movement of capital, goods, services, and labour. The other dispute is over the post-Brexit status of the soft border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Maintaining the status quo is critical to keeping the peace under the terms of the 1998 Good Friday agreement. Brussels seems flexible on its original proposal for full regulatory convergence and jurisdiction of EU courts over Belfast. This is meant to assuage London's concerns about two separate jurisdictions operating within the U.K. Britain's alternative proposal to avoid the return of checkpoints on the Irish border and to get around the difficulties of erecting invisible borders is to bring all of the U.K. under a common customs arrangement. Eurosceptics see this as aligning the country too close to the EU and curbing its freedom to negotiate trade deals outside the bloc. For Brussels, it would still amount to an unacceptable division of the EU's four freedoms.

European Council President Donald Tusk's remarks in Salzburg that the July proposals were not workable amplified these concerns. They drew angry reactions from Ms. May, who harked back to the *mantra* that a no-deal was better than a bad deal. But then, discrepancies in the opposing positions go back to the 2016 referendum outcome. Brussels had said then that while it regretted the verdict, it respected London's decision to leave. It stuck firm on established procedure and stressed that withdrawal negotiations could not commence until Article 50 of the EU treaty was triggered. It emphasised that exit from the bloc would involve costs for Britain, just as the benefits of membership entailed obligations. This accent on process could harden in the wake of the populist threat across the region to the European project. With elections to the European Parliament due next May, the leaders are keen that the anti-EU parties see the economic and political perils of quitting the bloc. Brexit uncertainty will linger, meanwhile.

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